

**CITY of GREENSBORO
HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION**

**REPORT ON
CONVERSATIONS ON RACE
and RACISM**

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GREENSBORO HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION

REPORT ON

CONVERSATIONS ON RACE and RACISM

Introduction

Race and racism are central issues in the Greensboro community as evidenced by the negative, counterproductive events that occurred during the months of March through June 2003. The conduct and behavior of some of our elected officials when attempting to discuss subjects of race and racism were embarrassing and inexcusable. It was obvious that individually and collectively we do not know how to discuss matters of race and racism in a way that results in progress toward solutions.

The purpose of forums on “Conversations on Race” was to determine ways to frame and conduct dialogue involving issues of race in a way that promotes understanding rather than division and hostility. The Commission believes that racial conflicts, when addressed appropriately, can move our community forward rather than backward.

Racism is a problem whose effects is not readily apparent to white Americans but is a daily fact of life for people of color. The problem can have a clear resolution when there is honest, open discussion of the issues involved. Also, learning how and being willing to talk openly about race and racism in dealing with one matter, makes resolving the next problem that much easier.

The “Conversations on Race and Racism” series was an ambitious project. We hope that the observations and recommendations contained in this report will receive widespread attention and action in the Greensboro community that will make this effort worthwhile.

The Challenge

During the search for a Guilford County Manager, January through June 2003, a white Guilford County Commissioner made disparaging remarks about several black County Commissioners as well as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Among other things, the white Commissioner stated that in order for him to vote for a person who is a member of the NAACP, that person would have to be “overly qualified”. Remarks were then traded between the white Commissioner, black Commissioners, the local NAACP and other black community members. The local daily newspaper did its part in exploiting the situation.

The Human Relations Commission was glad to see discussions of race and racism take place among elected officials and governing boards and commissions. It was very disheartening, however, that the discussions were so negative and polarizing. Also, it was clear that if the conversations were to be constructive, the Human Relations Commission would need to provide a process and develop a model for discussing issues of race and racism.

The Approach

The Commission's objective was to design forums that would hold elected officials accountable and allow broad participation from the community. As such, the first forum on June 18, 2003, was a public forum that hosted a panel consisting of the Mayor of Greensboro, the Chair, Guilford County Board of Commissioners and the Chair, Guilford County School Board of Education. The President of Bennett College was the Moderator. This forum was a huge success with standing room only for a crowd of over 150 people.

The next forums consisted of a series of separate face-to-face breakfasts and a lunch with Human Relations Commissioners and the entire Guilford County School Board of Education, Guilford County Board of Commissioners and the Greensboro City Council respectively.

The final segment consisted of one forum conducted in each of the five City Council districts. These forums provided an opportunity for the public to participate in a meaningful way and provided the Human Relations Commission with knowledge of how the community felt and what actions should be taken concerning issues of race and racism.

Prepared questions were asked by the facilitator to ensure that there was some consistency in the subject matter discussed from forum to forum. However, each forum presented its own subset of issues through follow-up questions and discussions.

Common Threads

Although each of the forums was unique, there were common strands that ran through all. Based on the written questions from the audience to members of the elected officials in the first forum, the public demanded that elected officials be held accountable for their conduct and behavior.

One person stated, "There is a numerous amount of disrespect displayed during Guilford County Commissioners meetings. I feel this is largely due to an African American male being the chairperson. I don't feel some of the Caucasian Commissioners would be as disrespectful if one of their own were in charge. Why is this acceptable? What kind of example does this set for our youth?"

Another stated, “Why don’t more people in positions of power speak out publicly and immediately when they see injustice being done?”

And another commented, “Much race-based humor is insightful, funny and can even help shed light on the issues we are gathered here to address. I’m all for that and even some that bump up against “the line”. But I can’t stand hateful or derogatory humor. How do you react if exposed to that type of joke and what do you recommend we do?”

Finally, one stated, “The nation’s political climate has changed in ways that foster racial division. What do you think about this and how can it be corrected or is it possible with the present administration?”

Also, participants at several forums noted that elected officials were not in attendance and questioned their commitment towards improving race relations. Several felt the problems of race and racism will not be resolved unless elected officials take the matter seriously.

A second common thread dealt with issues of race and racism in Guilford County schools. One person commented:

“For the past year, hundreds of high school students in several Guilford County schools attempted to establish programs and organizations spreading understanding and acceptance within their schools. The driving force behind this movement is the continuous harassment surrounding sexual orientation and racial differences that exists in our hallways and classrooms each and everyday. Even though these programs were merely promoting an open mind and an understanding of differences, they were not only discouraged, but often denied by the faculty and administration of Guilford County Schools”.

The issue of racism in schools was brought up in every forum and was discussed at the Guilford County Board of Education breakfast. In terms of the “achievement gap” between white and minority students as well as disproportionate disciplinary rates between the two groups, the consensus was there is a problem that must be addressed.

A third thread involved the widespread perception that the police department routinely employs techniques of racial and ethnic profiling.

Racial profiling was raised and discussed in each of the 5 district forums. This might have been so because there were a fair number of uniformed and plainclothes police officers in each forum. Nevertheless, in spite of police officers denying that racial and ethnic profiling are techniques used by the police department, most members of the audience believed profiling is used. Also, black participants said that they are stopped and questioned whenever they are in a predominately white residential neighborhood. A white police officer responded that whenever he stopped white people in predominately

black residential neighborhoods the white people would accuse him of stopping them because they are white.

A fourth thread that ran through each forum was the participants' belief that conversations on race should be more than just an issue between blacks and whites. The issue should involve a host of other ethnic and racial groups, including Latinos/Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans and other immigrant and refugee populations. As ethnic and racial populations increase so do tensions among groups.

A fifth and final thread was the recognition that a common definition of racism was needed before a meaningful conversation could occur; yet, it was difficult to get participants to agree on a definition. Most white people rejected the definition that race prejudice plus power equal racism if that meant all whites are racists and no person of color could be racist. Most black participants appeared to accept that definition. Also, many white people had difficulty accepting the concept of "white privilege" especially white people who were raised in low-income families. Further, most white people believed that much progress has been made in the area of race relations whereas most black people believed that although some progress has been made there is still a long way to go.

Issues

Each of the "common threads" listed above should be viewed as issues that need addressing. Additionally, some subjects were raised in at least one of the forums that also should be considered as issues. These subjects follow:

In 1994, the shooting and killing of Daryl Howerton, a young black male, by two white police officers was raised in one forum. The killing was ruled "justifiable homicide". Some are still questioning why Mr. Howerton had to be killed and why City Council members denied paying money to Mr. Howerton's mother.

Some questioned whether or not elected officials were informed about and were participating in the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project (GTCRP), a project that is reviewing the November 3, 1979 killing of five people by members of the Ku Klux Klan and Nazis. The project seeks to discover "the truth" about what happened and bring about community reconciliation and healing.

Also, noted in several of the forums was the lack of participation on the part of the general public in the forums. Several people asked why were there so few people attending the forums and wondered if it was because of lack of interest or fear of discussing the issue of racism

In at least two of the elected official forums it was noted that the City had made much progress in improving race relations but it still needed to work on fairness in the delivery of city services to everyone. Some officials noted that the city looked differently depending on what side of town you were on. Hazardous and unwanted facilities are

located in some sections of town whereas such facilities are not located in the higher socioeconomic residential areas.

Remedies

Strong, enlightened leadership of elected officials from diverse races, ethnic groups and cultures addressing the issue of race and racism is a must. As one City Council member observed she is proud of the district electorate system that provides for representation of a diverse citizenry. An African American County Commissioner stated she did not believe she was racist just because she wanted to see a County Manager and a Chair of the County Board of Commissioners that was the same color as she. It's about racially and ethnically diverse leaders who make decisions that provide access and opportunity for all people.

Ensure that our educational system provides a true, accurate history of the roles that all the various races, cultures and ethnic groups have played in this country and provide race relations training on a continuous basis to people at all levels working within the system. Policies and programs must be designed to ensure fairness and respect for everyone.

The issue of racial, ethnic and cultural profiling must be prohibited and the Greensboro Police Department must maintain policies and procedures that will preclude its use. Every effort should be made to eliminate the public's perception that profiling is widespread.

We should recognize that Greensboro has become a very diverse city with many people of different races, cultures and ethnic groups living here. Of necessity, the Conversations on Race and Racism must be broadened to be inclusive of all groups. Further, we should celebrate this diversity and the unique contributions that different groups have made and continue to make to society and the community.

As was stated in each of the forums, dialogues between people of different races and ethnic groups are useful in bringing about a better understanding and appreciation of all. Dialogues should continue in your home, school, faith institutions, workplaces and indeed be community-wide. If a consensus is to be reached on what this community should do to eliminate racism, these dialogues must take place.

In cases where there are long-standing, unresolved human relations issues such as with the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Project, we should come together as a community and engage in a process that has reconciliation and healing as its goal.

Assuming that some people do not want to discuss racial issues because they wish to avoid conflict or do not see racism as a problem, it is recommended that people attend race relation training workshops conducted by the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce (Other Voices), the Partnership Project (Undoing Racism) or the Greensboro National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ) programs. People become less fearful

and more comfortable discussing racial issues once they become knowledgeable and understand the nature of racism.

Ground Rules for Conducting Conversations on Race

As stated in the beginning, the main objective of the “Conversations on Race” forums was to determine ways to frame and conduct dialogue involving issues of race and racism in a way that promotes mutual understanding rather than hostility and division. Largely due to the expert facilitation by Mary Kendrick of Staub Leadership Consultants, this objective was achieved throughout all nine forums. Although participants were candid in voicing their opinions and beliefs, which oftentimes led to disagreement, none of those disagreements deteriorated into confrontations, arguments or debates. For this report, our purpose is to capture the dynamics of the interactions which resulted in people exchanging ideas freely on the subject of race and racism, considering different points of view, exploring disagreements and arriving at new understandings of the issues discussed. Recognizing that in most instances, especially when interacting one-on-one, you will not have the benefit of a expert facilitator, the following guidelines are taken from not only the positive interactions observed in the forums but also from the guidelines suggested in literature of the Study Circles Resource Center and the National Conference for Community and Justice.

Rule 1: Your personal experiences should form much of the basis on which you should discuss issues of race and racism.

- - In those instances where participants talked about issues based on their personal experiences they were rarely, if ever, challenged by others. It is difficult to deny someone else’s experiences.

Rule 2: Avoid personal attacks by focusing on the issue and not on the person.

- - On many occasions people engaged in conversations are familiar with each other and allow personality conflicts to cloud the issue. This often results in labeling, stereotyping or name calling which should be avoided.

Rule 3: Listen and accept without necessarily agreeing or rebutting.

- - It is difficult to listen to things that are “hard to hear” and not respond, but we need to hear in order to understand other views. This is easier to do when you know you will get the opportunity to share your thoughts after the “other views” are heard.

Rule 4: Concerning presentation styles, recognize and accept that cultural styles play a role.

- - Speakers may be expressive, passionate, imaginative or cognitive when presenting their thoughts. Again, avoid being distracted or attracted to the person but focus on the issue being presented.

Rule 5: Be open to changing your mind and really try to understand what others are saying.

- - Study Circles list this as “seeking first to understand and then to be understood”.

Rule 6: Don’t waste time arguing about points of fact.

- - Sometimes you should agree to disagree in order to not bog down the conversation. You might take time later to check out the facts.

Rule 7: Treat all participants with respect and as knowledgeable individuals who have contributions to make to the conversation.

- - All participants should be accorded equal status and rights.

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Appreciation is expressed to:

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Guilford County School Board of Education

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and to

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